

The Impact of Telecommuting Intensity on Occupational Stress of Working Women in the IT Industry in Sri Lanka

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Before the Covid pandemic, Sri Lankan companies were more familiar with physical working practices. This study aims to assess the impact of telecommuting intensity on occupational stress. Data were collected from 218 respondents using a self-administered questionnaire through an online survey. The convenience sampling technique was applied to select the sample. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression. The findings showed a strong positive relationship between telecommuting intensity and occupational stress among working women in the IT industry in Sri Lanka. Further, it exhibited that telecommuting intensity has a significant positive impact on occupational stress. Therefore, organizations must develop a plan to support telecommuters by providing flexible working hours and arranging online stress management programs.

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Introduction

During the novelty COVID-19 pandemic, telecommuting has become mainstream in the business world. Many organizations worldwide have replaced their commute to work with an electronic link to their traditional workplace ([Dharmasiri, 2015](#)). This is an innovative way to complete the task. Such practices have more potential to succeed in the event of a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or epidemic. These technology-based virtual working practices made considerable changes in the traditional work and working environment. This practice was uncommon in the Sri Lankan context. Some employees face many challenges and difficulties, such as lack of infrastructure, computer availability with internet connectivity, poor level of available talent, and computer literacy. Thus, the employees usually get stressed when they cannot complete the work demands due to the unavailability of such facilities, lack of skills, and distractions at home to perform their duties.

Stress is a person's change in nature or reaction to the circumstances outside and causes behavioral, psychological, and physical changes (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1993). The term stress, which is drawn from the Latin word "stringere" means an adversity, discomfort, pain, and unpleasant situation or affliction. The stress that telecommuters experience as a result of the application of multitasking, continuous connectivity, information overload, recurrent system upgrades, consequent uncertainty, recurrent re-learning, and consequent job-related insecurities and technological issues associated with the organizational use of ICT (Tarafdar, 2010).

Through telecommuting, both employer and employee lives become more complicated.

According to the father of telecommuting, Nilles (1994), it is a working pattern that encourages professionals to work beyond the conventional office settings and communicate through telecommunication or computer-based technology. In the past, researchers found that telecommuting increases the flexibility of work arrangements, such as fulfilling household responsibilities, managing time, and strengthening relationships (Allen et al., 2015). However modern research suggests that telecommuting work arrangements may result in the blurring of work-life boundaries, work-life balance more challenging, long working hours, and insufficient rest breaks (Tomei, 2021). Through telecommuting, both employer and employee lives become more

complicated. Under the physical working conditions, there is a boundary between family life and professional life, but telecommuting removes this border and merges employee family life and professional life. They have to face a blended life. Sometimes employees must respond to e-mails, text messages, and calls at all hours of the day; meanwhile, they fulfill family requirements. Increasingly, employees felt the potential risk of mental ill health. Technostress, distress occurs to adjust to the new techno-overload, techno invasion, technological platform, techno uncertainty, techno complexity, and techno insecurity are some of the diseases most telecommuters are afflicted with (Spagnoli et al., 2020).

A few related studies have been done on the relationship between telecommuting intensity and occupational stress in the Western context. This is a specific area that many organizations have begun to address, which emerges as critical after extensive use of telecommuting during and after the Covid 19 period. Very little attention has been paid to this area during the new normal pandemic situation.

Consequently, will badly affect employee engagement, productivity, and performance level of the organization.

There are more family responsibilities, and telecommuting pressure may affect employees' job stress. The women workers especially faced considerable stress compared to men due to interruptions from

unavoidable family commitments when they performed office work at home and the poor scheduling of telework even after or before regular working hours. Consequently, will badly affect employee engagement, productivity, and performance level of the organization. There are no past studies related to working women in the IT industry. Hence, there is a time gap and a lack of updated evidence in this study area; this study focuses on the impact of telecommuting intensity on the occupational stress of working women in the IT industry.

Objectives of the Study

According to the discussions with a few managers in the IT industry, researchers found that many employees leave organizations in the IT industry and shift to different jobs. Further, they mentioned that a higher turnover rate was reported among female employees than male employees. As per the evidence they collected from the exit interviews, the employees who left the organizations have revealed they cannot cope with the higher level of job stress and are physically and mentally exhausted.

In recent years, telecommuting has been intense with the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic situation, and the work and the work environment has changed significantly for these employees. Therefore, it is interesting to study whether this telecommuting has an impact on their work stress.

There are contradictory findings regarding telecommuting and occupational

stress before the Covid-19 pandemic and during the pandemic. Some previous studies review that telecommuting generate more positive outcomes for individual and society. It saves commuting hours while increasing independence in managing time and autonomy (Harpaz, 2002), and family relations (Hall & Atkinson, 2006). However, some research findings vary from these results. They have found that more telecommuting hours badly influence individual work-life balance (Johnson et al., 2007) and employees feel stressed out about their career growth owing to the lesser visibility of their managers (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012). One major negative impact of this work practice is social interaction with peer groups, subordinates, and other interactive parties being out of site, which can limit their promotion opportunities and increase role stress (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Another concern regarding telecommuting is that it can intensify work-family conflicts and increase stress because it blurs the boundaries between home and workplace (Madsen, 2000). There has been little research regarding telecommuting intensity and occupational stress in Sri Lankan context, especially in the IT sector. Further, it is crucial to study how this telecommuting affects women workers rather than male employees, as women workers have more unconditional and unavoidable family commitments when they stay home compared to male employees.

There are no specific research studies on the telecommuting intensity and occupational stress of working women in the IT Industry during the new normal in

Sri Lanka. Therefore, in this study, we aimed to identify whether telecommuting intensity impacts occupational stress among working women in the IT industry in Sri Lanka.

Thus, the study's main objective is to identify the impact of telecommuting intensity on occupational stress among working women in the IT industry in Sri Lanka. Further, it aimed to identify the nature and direction of the relationship between telecommuting intensity and occupational stress among these employees.

Literature Review

Occupational Stress: Occupation is an essential part of human life but is also a significant stress source. Occupational stress is a silent killer. Stress can be defined as an unfavorable relationship between a person and the environment during an imbalance between an individual's resources and situational demands (Lazarus, 1966).

Workplace stress creates a considerable problem for employees, employers, and society. Furthermore, work-related stress shows a possible loss of talent for organizations as top performers disengage from work where work-related stress, its causes, symptoms, and consequences are prevalent (Cartwright, 2000). As a result of this new normal situation, many organizations have turned to telecommuting. This is a challenge for the employees in several ways due to taking up a heavy workload, longer work hours, and unreasonable demands, creating un-

certainty and job risk Subha et al. (2021).

It is evident that the extent of stress experienced by women may outweigh that by men. Tomei (2021) has stated that there is a higher possibility of generating a feeling of professional and social isolation among teleworking women workers than men. Andrew et al. (2022) have found in their study done in the UK that women workers are interrupted by their children 50% more frequently than men in their teleworking during the lockdown period. According to Mascherini and Bisello (2020), most of the time, women workers who have children below 12 years of age have more distractions to their office work and many difficulties in meeting the job demands and, at the same time, coping with additional family commitment when they do office work staying at home. Thus, it is critical to see how telecommuting affects women workers' stress levels.

The current study is used for the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory explains that individuals prefer to obtain, retain, foster, and protect resources. The degree to which individuals appraise something as threatening, and the coping choices they make, are determined mainly by the resources they have. Someone who threatens by resource losses or when exactly those resources are lost, or whose investment fails are reasons to arise psychological stress (Hobfoll. et al., 1989).

Telecommuting: Telecommuting is an alternative work arrangement in which employees perform tasks elsewhere that

are normally done in a primary or central workplace for at least some portion of their work schedule, using electronic media to interact with others inside and outside the organization (Feldman & Gainey, 1997). Telecommuting intensity means to what extent telecommuting is used in organizations. According to Brink (2020) the relationship between full-time telecommuters and their superiors or co-workers may be more task-based, with a lack of informal communication. Such task-based relationships may be valuable in improving efficiency, but it may cause to reduce employee's intrapersonal connections with superiors or co-workers that indicates a lesser of social support (Fay & Kline, 2011). When telecommuting, many organizations have to face challenges in communication and social interactions. Physical interaction is most important for job identification and job satisfaction. Less social support may increase the employee stress level. According to Bulos and Chaker (1995), employees have to struggle with overlapping work-family responsibilities that cause burnout and stress.

Employees have to struggle with overlapping work-family responsibilities that cause burnout and stress.

The Link between Occupational Stress and Telecommuting: Telecommuters are separated from others and away from the work environment, creating social isolation and weakening interactions. It may increase the risk of experiencing employee stress (Hayes et al, 2020). A fa-

mous statement popularized with the work of Heyes et al. (2020) in this period is "I'm not working at home; I'm living at work". Telecommuters struggle with time and overlapping work and home responsibilities (Chong et al., 2020). That increases work pressure, stress, and negative emotions such as worry, guilt, and irritation. Moreover, they have to answer calls from time to time and keep in contact with supervisors, subordinates, and customers at home, which leads to stress.

Some researchers have identified negative associations between telecommuting and employee stress levels, whereas some have found a positive association between these two variables. Gajendran and Harrison (2007) have identified that telecommuting has a negative impact on occupational stress. Similarly, Golden et al. (2012) found that the extent of telecommuting and the amount of telecommuting experiences are negatively related to occupational stress. But, Kapoor et al. (2021) found a positive association between telecommuting and occupational stress. Even though their findings contradict the direction of the effect, it indicates the possibility of impacting the extent of telecommuting on employee stress.

After reviewing the literature, the following hypotheses and conceptual framework shown in Fig. 1 were formulated for the study.

H1- There is a significant impact between telecommuting intensity and occupational stress.

Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework



Methodology

The present study is a quantitative one done in a non-contrived setting. Data were collected from working women in the IT Industry in Sri Lanka, and the unit of analysis was individual. The population of the study comprises all the working women in the IT Industry in Sri Lanka. A sample of 218 working women in the IT industry was considered for the study, and the respondents were selected for the sample based on the primary data for this study collected through a self-administered, convenient sampling techniques.

The questionnaire has met the accepted standards of reliability and validity in its original scales. The questionnaire consists of three sections. Section A consists of general information, and Section B is used to determine the extent of telecommuting intensity. Section C is used to determine occupational stress. There was a google form prepared for the current study. The structured questionnaire was disseminated online among respondents via mail and other media like WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and Twitter. One month was given for the respondents to send the filled google form back. Ethical standards were maintained as the responses were anonymous, and the respondents were free to withdraw from the questionnaire at any time without notifying the researchers.

Measures

Occupational Stress (the dependent variable) was measured by 35 items on 7 dimensions using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire developed by Cousins, et al. (2004). The scale included eight items on job demand, six items on job control, five items on managerial support, four items on work college support, five items on the job role scale, four items on the relationship, and three items on change. Items are like “I am pressured to work long hours” and “I can decide when to take a break”.

Telecommuting intensity (independent variable) was measured through a questionnaire adopted from two items scale developed by Golden et al. (2006) with a 5-point scale as shown in Table 1. We ensured the validity of the questionnaire through Cronbach Alfa values (Cronbach Alfa > .7). Further, the validity was ensured with the KMO measure of sampling adequacy (KMO Coefficient > .7, $P < .05$), and cumulative percentage of the Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings (ESSL Cum% > 50%) along with the Item Factor Loadings (FL > 0.5) of the exploratory factor analysis as recommended by Hair et al., (2010).

Descriptive Statistics

Mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis values of the constructs in the current research model are given in Table 2. As shown in the Table 2, all the values are in the acceptable range and it ensured that the data are normally distributed and the variability of the construct would be normally accepted for further statistical analysis.

Table 1 Telecommuting Intensity Measurement Scale

	1	2	3	4	5
On average, how many hours per week do you spend away from the office working as a telecommuter?	8 hours or less per week	9 - 16 hours per week	17 - 32 hours per week	33 - 40 hours per week	More than 40 hours per week
What percentage of the average work week do you spend telecommuting?	20% or less	21% - 40%	41% - 60%	61% - 80%	More than 80%

Source: Telecommuting Scale adopted from Golden, Veiga, & Simsek (2006) with a modified scale.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Occupational stress	2.9534	.62735	0.052	-0.497
Telecommuting Intensity	2.9432	.64396	0.128	-0.484

Source: Analyzed data, 202

Correlation Analysis

Building on the linear relationship between telecommuting intensity and occupational stress, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to assess the strength of association among the said two variables. The results of the correlation analysis are given in Table 3.

A strong positive correlation is found between the telecommuting intensity and

occupational stress ($r = 0.841$), which is statistically significant at $P = 0.000$.

Regression Analysis for telecommuting Intensity and Occupational Stress

Linear regression analysis was done to test the hypothesis H1 advanced for the impact of telecommuting intensity on occupational stress. Results of the test are given in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 3 Correlation Analysis

		Correlations	
		Occupational Stress	Telecommuting Intensity
Occupational Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	.841**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	218	218
Telecommuting Intensity	Pearson Correlation	.841**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	218	218

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Analyzed data, 2022

Table 4 Regression Statistics for Telecommuting Intensity & Occupational Stress

Multiple R	.841 ^a
R Square	0.707
Adjusted R Square	0.705
Standard Error	0.34089
Observation(N)	218
F	313.668
Sig.	.000 ^a
Regression Method	Linear Enter

a. Predictors: (Constant), Telecommuting Intensity

Source: Analyzed data, 2022

According to the results in Table 4, the telecommuting intensity explains 70.7% (R Square = 0.707) of occupational stress (Sig. = 0.000, which is less than 0.05). Further, as shown in Table 5, telecommuting intensity significantly and positively impacts occupational stress (b value = 0.819; P = 0.000). In fact, hypothesis 1 H1 was substantiated, accepting that telecommuting intensity significantly impacts occupational stress.

Table 5 Coefficients for Telecommuting Intensity and Occupational Stress

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients ^a		Standardized Coefficients ^a	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
1 (Constant)	.543	.139		3.894	.000
Telecommuting Intensity	.819	.046	.841	17.711	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Occupational Stress

Source: Analyzed Data, 2022

Discussion

The primary objective of this research was to assess the impact of telecommuting intensity on the occupational stress of working women in the IT industry. Most previous researchers before the pandemic found that telecommuting negatively impacted occupational stress. Gajendran and Harrison (2007); and Golden et al. (2012) found that telecommuting is associated with significantly lower occupational stress. After the pandemic, most researchers found a positive association between telecommuting and occupational stress. The findings of the current study also depict a significant positive correla-

The results of the regression analysis showed that there is a significant positive impact of telecommuting intensity on the occupational stress of working women in the IT industry in Sri Lanka.

tion between telecommuting intensity and occupational stress. Moreover, the results of the regression analysis showed that there is a significant positive impact of telecommuting intensity on the occupational stress of working women in the IT industry in Sri Lanka. Past research findings and those from the current research are contradictory before and af-

ter the pandemic. We suggest contextual differences and time differences might have affected these results. The current study was conducted during the new normal pandemic situation.

Conclusion

This research aims to assess the impact of telecommuting intensity on the occupational stress of working women in the IT industry. According to the correlation analysis, it is found that there is a strong positive correlation between telecommuting intensity and occupational stress. Further, the results of the regression analysis revealed that the telecommuting intensity has a significant positive impact on the occupational stress of working women in the IT industry.

Working women in the IT industry experience occupational stress due to the telecommuting intensity.

Considering the findings, the current study concludes that working women in the IT industry experience occupational stress due to the telecommuting intensity.

Implications

This study's findings will be important theoretically and practically for the parties directly involved with the research area. As concluded by the results, telecommuting intensity can make a significant impact on occupational stress. Based on the study's findings, we can provide some implications that will be

important for working women in the IT industry. Telecommuters can reduce occupational stress by themselves. Telecommuters can begin their day by taking a walk and a cup of tea or coffee, waking up early in the morning to prepare work day schedule. They can set a regular lunchtime and take a break while telecommuting. Telecommuters can create a dedicated workplace, reduce distractions and connect with friends. Through these steps, the telecommuter can reduce their occupational stress ownself

Company management can introduce flexible working arrangements and online stress management programs. Management can create a virtual platform to share their problems and work-related issues and allocate separate time for team working activities. The company can give separate time for tea breaks and encourage telecommuters to socialize via online platforms. Organizational administration should provide telecommuters with the necessary infrastructure, internet connection facilities, and digitalized routine manual activities.

Limitations & Future Scope

The present study was conducted based on working women in IT Industry. It can be suggested that future researchers can conduct their studies by taking samples that represent different industries. In this study, we did not consider any mediators between the two main variables, and the mediators, such as emotional intelligence, supervisory support etc., can be considered in future

studies. In this study, we considered only the women workers for the sample, and future researchers can make a comparison of men and women in different industries. Further, Current research is a quantitative study, and data were collected through a standard questionnaire. Hence, it is suggested that future researchers could conduct qualitative studies on the same area gathering data by different methods such as the interview method.

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